02 January 2004

U.S. and Canada Cooperating on Mad Cow Investigation
Officials say DNA test results expected in early January

Text of December 31, 2003, Technical Briefing and Webcast with U.S. Government Officials follows.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) continues to work with Canadian officials to verify the origin of the dairy cow slaughtered in Washington State in December 2003 that was found to have suffered from bovine spongiform encephalopathy, commonly known as BSE or mad cow disease.

During a December 31 briefing, USDA and other food safety officials outlined efforts to date to track both the origin of the cow and the whereabouts of other cattle that may have entered the United States at the same time. They also detailed a series of new rules ordered by Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman to bolster existing protections against the spread of BSE.

Records indicate that the animal was approximately 6-1/2 years old at the time of slaughter. USDA is working with Canada to conduct DNA testing to verify that the correct animal has been identified, USDA Chief Veterinarian Ron DeHaven said. He added that DNA testing was expected to begin December 31, with results available as early as the first week in January.

Veneman has called for a team of international experts to review the U.S. investigation and make recommendations, and Dehaven told reporters that the team would be similar to the group that conducted such a review in Canada. It will be led by Dr. Ulrich Kihm, former chief veterinary officer of Switzerland, DeHaven said. In addition to Kihm, USDA has tentative commitments from: William Hueston, director of the Center for Animal Health and Food Safety, University of Minnesota; Dagmar Heim, chief of the BSE control program in the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office; and Stuart MacDiarmid, a BSE expert with the government of New Zealand.

On December 30 Veneman announced additional safeguards to bolster the U.S. protection systems against BSE and further protect public health. She said the policies would further strengthen protections against BSE by: removing certain animals and specified risk material and tissues from the human food chain; requiring additional process controls for establishments using advanced meat recovery (AMR); holding meat from cattle that have been targeted for BSE surveillance testing until the test has confirmed negative, and prohibiting the air-injection stunning of cattle.

Veneman also announced that USDA will begin immediate implementation of a verifiable system of national animal identification. The development of such a system has been under way for more than 1-1/2 years to achieve uniformity, consistency and efficiency across this national system.

The officials said that the specific actions to be taken by USDA and its Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) include:

Downer Animals -- Effectively immediately, USDA will ban all downer cattle -- cows that have been injured or are too sick to walk -- from the human food chain.

Product Holding --- FSIS inspectors will no longer mark cattle tested under the BSE surveillance program as "inspected and passed" until confirmation is received that the animals have tested negative for BSE.

Specified Risk Materials [SRM] -- USDA will enhance its regulations by declaring as specified risk materials skull, brain, trigeminal ganglia, eyes, vertebral column, spinal cord and dorsal root ganglia of cattle over 30 months of age and the small intestine of cattle of all ages. This

designation will prohibit the use of these materials in the human food supply. Tonsils from all cattle are already considered inedible and therefore do not enter the food supply.

Advanced Meat Recovery -- AMR is an industrial technology that removes muscle tissue from the bone of beef carcasses under high pressure without incorporating bone material when operated properly. FSIS has previously had regulations in place that prohibit spinal cord from being included in products labeled as "meat." The new regulation expands that prohibition to include other nerve tissue.

Air-Injection Stunning -- To ensure that portions of the brain are not dislocated into the tissues of the carcass as a consequence of humanely stunning cattle during the slaughter process, FSIS is issuing a regulation to ban the practice of air-injection stunning.

Mechanically Separated Meat -- USDA will prohibit use of mechanically separated meat in human food.

Following is the transcript of the USDA technical briefing from December 31:

(begin transcript)

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Technical Briefing and Webcast with
U.S. Government Officials on BSE [bovine spongiform encephalopathy] Case

December 31, 2003

DR. RON DEHAVEN (USDA): Thank you very much for joining U.S. this afternoon. I do have some new information to report on the status of our ongoing investigation. First is regarding the status of our effort to trace the 82 animals. This would be the positive animal as well as what we think now are 81 animals that would have come into the United States who were at least listed on a health certificate presumably to come into the United States along with the positive cow.

This is what we've been able to confirm thus far. There is a Canadian health certificate dated August 28, 2001, which lists 82 ear-tag numbers from cattle that were part of a herd dispersal in Alberta, Canada. Again I would emphasize that this is the primary line of inquiry at this point. Our most likely source of the animal would be that herd in Alberta, Canada.

Of the 82 animals listed on that health certificate, one of those ear-tag numbers is the animal associated with this BSE-positive animal. And that is the animal that we are now subjecting -- or, tissues that we are subjecting -- to DNA testing to hopefully confirm the identity.

Nine others of those 82 are still on the ground as part of the indexed herd, the herd from which the positive cow left immediately before going to slaughter. And we have good leads on all of the remaining animals.

Much of the work that we're doing right now is to corroborate the information, the preliminary leads that we have, and we're using documents such as health certificates, records on the farm, etcetera, those kinds of documents, as well as obtaining affidavits from those involved with the handling of these animals.

There's also information to suggest that only 81 of the 82 animals actually entered the United States with one presumably remaining back in Canada, and we will continue to work with our Canadian colleagues to trace that animal.

With regard to the DNA testing, the lab testing could begin as early as this evening as we are sending multiple samples to two laboratories -- one in Canada and one in the United States. Hopefully, I will have more information to report to you about this early next week, but understandably we want to have results from both laboratories -- the one in Canada and the one in the United States -- before we reach any conclusions from that testing regimen.

Our cooperative efforts with the government of Canada, with officials in the state of Washington, the herd owner, and the slaughter plant continue and are very good. We will certainly report any new developments as they become available to U.S. as we continue to hold these press conferences.

In the meantime, I think it would be appropriate if we spent some time discussing some of the announcements and more of the details relative to those announcements that the Secretary made yesterday in terms of changes to our program.

To recap, USDA will accelerate the implementation of a national identification program. We will remove nonambulatory animals from the food chain. We will prohibit the use of specified risk materials or SRMs in the human food chain -- from animals over 30 months of age; require additional process controls for establishment of systems or the advanced meat recovery systems for animals over 30 months of age; and prohibit the use of air-injection stunning from cattle. And actually this is something that has already been implemented voluntarily by the industry, but the action announced yesterday will codify that restriction.

And for any animals that would be tested at slaughter those animals would be held pending results from a negative test.

I'd like to turn my attention in terms of those items for a minute here to animal identification. I'm of course very pleased to say that we have been involved in an effort now for a year and a half to develop and implement an animal identification system. USDA is part of a team consisting of more than 70 organizations and approximately 100 individuals representing government and industry to develop a nationally coordinated animal ID program for disease tracking purposes.

The group has developed a plan of action that was accepted as work in progress by the U.S. Animal Health Association at their most recent meeting in October of this year. This plan will enhance our capability to respond to disease issues with the goal of being able to trace back animals to their point of origin within 48 hours, thereby providing for rapid detection, containment and elimination of disease threats. This plan includes standards for uniform and nationally recognized premises and animal identification systems with tags that can be visually read as well as electronically scanable.

Although the plan is initially focused on cattle and swine, the intent is to eventually apply this system to all livestock. We have species-specific groups that are currently working to evaluate the plan and work on implementation details for their respective species.

More information is available about our current plan at a website which is www.usaip.info.

We talked a bit about surveillance for nonambulatory animals. Certainly that was a very significant component of the Secretary's announcement yesterday, and this policy of course would exclude downed animals from the human food supply.

As you know, these nonambulatory animals have been the single most important population that we have tested as part of our ongoing effort to survey for BSE in the United States. Indeed, in each of the years 2002 and 2003 we tested over 20,000 animals with about three-quarters of those animals coming from nonambulatory animals found at the time of slaughter.

In light of yesterday's announcement, these animals will no longer be going to slaughterhouses, but instead most likely most of them will be euthanized and sent to rendering plants. So in the coming days we will be working very closely with the rendering industry as well as other colleagues in the animal disposal industry to ensure that we retain access to this very important population of animals for our BSE surveillance purposes.

And indeed, we will not only work closely with our industry but even as importantly be working very closely with our colleagues in FDA [Food and Drug Administration] as we develop this new surveillance system.

We will also be working with the veterinary profession through the American Association or American Veterinary Medical Association and allied groups to obtain animals from this target population that may be on the farm.

And then one last area that I'll touch on, and that is the international review panel that [Agriculture] Secretary [Ann] Veneman mentioned yesterday in her announcement. We have in fact contacted members for an international team of experts to review our investigation and make recommendations as it relates to our overall BSE program. They will conduct this review following completion of our epidemiological investigation and make any recommendations that may require a follow-up as it relates to that investigation as well as I mentioned any recommendations that they would have for U.S. in terms of a national strategy.

This team will be similar if not identical to the group that conducted such a review following the find of a single case of BSE in Canada in May. The team will be led by Dr. Ulrich Kihm, the former chief veterinary officer of Switzerland, who now owns a consulting company called Safe Food Solutions, Incorporated.

In addition to Dr. Kihm we have commitments from Dr. William Hueston who is currently the director of the Center of Animal Health and Food Safety at the University of Minnesota; Dr. Dagmar Heim, chief of BSE Control Program in the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office; and Dr. Stuart MacDiarmid, a BSE expert with the government of New Zealand.

We are very much looking forward to getting this group's review on our operations that we are currently conducting as well as the recommendations that we will make as we continue to look to ways that we can improve our already robust system.

With that, I'll first offer my colleague from FSIS [Food Safety Inspection Service] an opportunity to make some comments, and then we will go to questions and answers. So Dr. Dan Engeljohn from Food Safety and Inspection Service.

DR. DAN ENGELJOHN: Good morning. I'd like to identify that we have some clarifications from our information that was released yesterday. We are going to clarify that in the policies we're working on, instead of the entire small intestine that will be identified as a risk material it will be only the distal ilium. And we're making some clarifications to the actions that would be taken with the vertebral column of beef and that would be that we will be following closely the information that Canada put out on how they defined what would or would not be allowed from the vertebral column.

So the important thing is that the vertebral column from beef will not be allowed to be used for mechanical separation or for the advanced meat recovery systems that we have in place here if the cattle are 30 months of age or older.

Also I'd like to just point out that we did put in place our downer policy yesterday, so that went into effect after the Secretary made the announcement. The other activities that we've identified that we're moving forward on in terms of policy will in fact go into effect when the regulations publish in the Federal Register.

Okay?

DR. DEHAVEN: Thanks, Dan. I just want to make a comment on, in particular, the SRM removal component of the Secretary's announcements. I think that with the number of announcements that were made, all of which are significant, that perhaps the importance of this SRM removal has been lost in all of the discussion and flurry of activity. When it comes to protecting human health we know from the science that there are certain tissues where the prion or infectious agent gravitates to, and that's in the specified risk materials. We also know that with an incubation period of typically three to five years that the disease doesn't occur. There is no danger to animals under 30 months of age. So by removing the specified risk materials from animals under 30 months of age, we have done the single most important thing that we can do to protect human health.

And given that with the fact that we've had a feed ban in place that prohibits the feeding of ruminant protein back to ruminants, we're protecting animal health. So those two components certainly add a significant amount of robustness to our system as we also continue to look harder through increased surveillance.

So with that, let's go to questions, and since we started on the telephone bridge, yesterday, is that right, Ed? -- we'll start with questions in the room.

Randy:

OPERATOR: Please press star "1" on your phone to ask your question. Star "1."

RANDY FABI (Reuters): There are media reports that investigators are looking at a rendering plant in Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, that may link, that might have provided infected feed to the two mad cow cases -- one in Canada and now one in Washington state. I was wondering if you can confirm this, and if so if you can provide any more details.

DR. DEHAVEN: Thank you. I actually spoke earlier this morning with Dr. Bryan Evans, the chief veterinary officer in Canada, about this very specific thing. He is aware of the media reports and wanted to let me know that at this point in time it is way too premature and the information far too preliminary to draw any conclusions.

Having, even if there is a similar source in terms of a feed plant, those plants would get source materials from any number of different locations. So he wanted me to pass on along the fact that they are aware of this; it is certainly part of the investigation that they have ongoing in Canada, but it is certainly far too premature to draw any conclusions or draw any connections between the feed that may have been fed to this animal that we recently found and the animal that was infected or found infected in May in Canada.

But certainly that is an active area that is being investigated as we speak.

The gentleman in the black sweater.

DAN GOLDSTEIN: Dan Goldstein from Bloomberg News.

One question for you, Mr. DeHaven and one question for Mr. Sundlof.

With the feed ban from August 1997, I just want to clarify, feed was banned in May of 2003 crossing the border from Canada to the US. Am I correct?

DR. SUNDLOF: Yes.

DAN GOLDSTEIN: Okay. What about the feed that was in the United States prior to that? Does that get consumed relatively quickly or is there a chance that maybe some feed from as early as April 1997, before the 1997 went into play, is still in the United States?

DR. SUNDLOF: Before the 1997 ban? That would be highly unlikely. The feed does move very quickly in commerce, and one of the things that's common in the feed industry is most feed gets fed warm. It's still warm by the time it gets fed, consumed rapidly. And because of the volumes of feed that are produced there isn't a lot of storage space, so it is a commodity that moves very quickly in commerce.

DR. DEHAVEN: The gentleman in the brown sport coat?

BILL TOMSON: Bill Tomson, Oster Dow Jones.

I just want to throw something -- you said you found nine of the animals? You found them to have it, and are they being tested?

DR. DEHAVEN: We have definitely identified nine animals in the indexed herd, so we know that 10 animals definitely went to the indexed herd, the positive cow plus nine others. In terms of testing them, premature, no determination has been made. As you know we don't have a live animal test, so the animals, if they're going to be tested, would have to be sacrificed and then brain tissue obtained for doing that testing.

I think some of the factors that we would want to consider initially would be confirming that they all came from the same herd in Alberta. We want to confirm that in fact we have the right herd in Alberta. So in the meantime -- and also would they be birth cohorts of this animal? If in fact the age is such that there's no absolute reason to suggest or to -- if we're able to absolutely confirm that they weren't fed the same feed as the indexed cow then we may or may not take the animals at that point.

We will certainly operate out of an abundance of caution. I don't want to suggest that we would have animals from an infected herd without giving all due consideration as to which animals might or might not be sacrificed. I don't know what all we know in terms of the age and other parameters about those animals, so I don't want to make that kind of decision during a press conference but would defer to our epidemiologist on the ground and disease experts in terms of whether or not they would need to be sacrificed or not.

We will err on the side of caution when making that determination, without a doubt. But again, in the meantime the important thing is, they're not going anywhere. They're subject to that hold order. They're under quarantine on that indexed premise. We know where they are, and so that's the important thing at this point. They're not going anywhere.

With that, Operator, we will go to the first question from the telephone bridge, please?

OPERATOR: The first question is from Steve Mitchell. Please state your affiliation.

STEVE MITCHELL: Hi. This is Steve Mitchell with United Press International.

I just heard Dr. DeHaven, you just a short time ago said that animals under 30 months of age don't seem to have the disease, but there's been a couple of cases in Japan recently that were younger than that. Can you comment on, on those animals?

DR. DEHAVEN: Yes, I can. There have been a total of nine cases that the Japanese government has reported as positive, and two recently have been under 30 months of age. A couple of things on that.

They have reported them as positive, and yet both of those animals were negative on the immuno-histo chemistry test, the test that is internationally recognized as the gold standard test. They have been positive on other tests.

At this point in time there has not been an opportunity for international corroboration on the exact findings as it relates to those animals, and some suggestion by the Japanese government that perhaps they have a different strain of BSE.

Again, all of that is chatter within the intellectual community. No definitive determination made at this point. And certainly it would be premature to modify any national program based on those two animals.

I would also add that in the calendar years 2001 and 2002 in the European Union there were approximately 19 million animals tested. Out of those 19 million -- and the reason the number is so high is that they are essentially testing all animals that go to slaughter -- they had in the neighborhood of 4,200 positive animals. Of those 4,200 plus or minus positive animals two were under 30 months of age, both of them found in 2001. One of them was 28 months old; one of them was 29 months old. So very close to the 30 month timeframe.

We also know that the incubation period is dose-dependent. The more infectious material that an animal consumes, the shorter the incubation period. So you would also expect that it would be much more likely that we would have younger-age animals show up as positive in Europe given that they have had a much higher prevalence of the disease in Europe.

We have in North America and certainly we can validate through our surveillance testing that we have a very low prevalence of the disease in North America.

To the issue of whether or not there is a different strain, we know that our exposure to the disease comes from Europe, comes from animals and feed that may have been imported before the appropriate or before the bans were put in place. And so if in fact there are two strains of BSE -- and we have no evidence at this point to support that -- but if the suggestion that there is a different, more than one strain of BSE, it would seem logical that we would have the European strain.

And here again, the likelihood of animals under 30 months of having the disease is extremely remote.

Next question from the telephone bridge, please?

OPERATOR: The next question is from Sally Schuff. Please state your affiliation.

SALLY SCHUFF: Yes. This is Sally Schuff with Feedstuffs.

My question is, have you had conversation with states about similar ban on downer cattle and meat in state-inspected plants? Or is this strictly a federal ban?

DR. ENGELJOHN: The state programs would be required to follow the requirements that we would have in place at the federal establishments.

DR. DEHAVEN: With that, one more question from the telephone bridge, and then we'll go back to the room here.

OPERATOR: The next question is from Jeff Sparshott. Please state your affiliation.

JEFF SPARSHOTT: Washington Times.

The DNA tests that may begin this evening, who's conducting those, and when would the results be available?

DR. DEHAVEN: I don't have the exact names of the laboratories. One is in, the U.S. laboratory is in Nebraska, and it is a agricultural research service laboratory. It's a USDA laboratory that has that expertise. The other laboratory, the one in Canada, is in Saskatchewan. In terms of the results, again this would assume that there are no problems in terms of delivery of the samples to the laboratory, which some of those samples are yet to arrive. Assuming that we don't have any laboratory glitches in either of the two laboratories -- and it always seems to me when we have the most important samples being run as quickly as we can that's precisely when we have laboratory glitches -- so assuming no laboratory glitches, then we could have results from both laboratories early next week.

And so I can assure you once we have those results and have had an opportunity to analyze them we will be making an appropriate announcement at that point in time. But my best estimate at this point would be first part of next week.

And then moving to the room here, the gentleman in the white turtleneck?

REPORTER: NBC.

Dr. DeHaven, you said a few minutes ago that you had no means of live testing the animals, and then you said that 19 million cows in Europe had been tested. How is Britain going to -- how are Europeans testing and the United States not? How is that happening, and why not?

DR. DEHAVEN: Thank you for the question. Let me clarify.

The 19 million animals that were tested in Europe were animals tested at slaughter, so they were animals that had been slaughtered and samples recovered from the brain at the time of slaughter. SO they're not using a live animal test. They indeed are one or more live animal tests that are currently under development, so we would hope in the future we will have that tool. It's certainly a necessary one.

In the meantime, the Europeans are using one of several or all of the available screening tests. The rapid screening tests that are available are being used in one form or another in Europe. Those would be the tests that we would also be looking at as potentially starting to use here in the US, but I would emphasize again that none of them are live animal tests.

Yes, ma'am.

TRACEY WRIGHT: Tracey Wright with Global Television.

(unclear) too early to speculate about the link (unclear) Canada, but how important or significant would a finding like that be, and also can you just remind us, put in perspective the importance of the whole feed (unclear) in this investigation?

DR. DEHAVEN: Let me take the initial cut at that and then provide Dr. Sundlof from FDA to respond as well.

Again, the information that the Canadians have with regard to the tracing of this feed is very preliminary. And I don't know the exact details, and I think the most important part is that they don't have all of the information to definitively make any kind of link epidemiologically between the feed that may have been fed to the cow that was found positive in Canada in May of this year and our more recent find in the state of Washington this year.

Whether or not it came from the same plant or not is certainly relevant. However, even if it is determined that the feed came from the same plant, recognize that each of these feed plants have multiple sources for the raw product that goes into that. So to draw conclusions based on the fact that the feed may or may not have come from the same feed mill would be premature to make any definitive conclusion.

As we have mentioned over the last couple of days, as we have been able to get better information on the age of the cow that we found positive in the state of Washington on the cow that was slaughtered December 9, and have now information to suggest that she was 6 to 6 1/2 years old at the time of slaughter, is extremely relevant because again the most likely source of infection is through consumption of contaminated proteins in feed.

And that confirms in fact that if this animal consumed the feed before the feed ban, there's -- it confirms the validity, the importance of the feed ban in terms of precluding any further spread after those feed bans went in place in August of '97.

Steve, anything to add?

DR. STEPHEN SUNDLOF (FDA): Yes, just to put in perspective the question, what is the significance, how does that fit into the overall story?

Back in '97 -- well prior to '97, even back in the late '80s when BSE was a new disease in Great Britain, the United States acted very quickly in erecting what we have referred to in the past as firewalls. The first firewall was to ensure that no materials, no potentially infectious material would enter the United States from countries where BSE was found.

And Canada has basically, we've been in lock-step basically with Canada. So that as we've proposed regulations and restrictions, they have basically taken the same measures themselves.

So that was, the first firewall was to prevent any infectious material from getting into the United States or North America in this case.

The second firewall was the surveillance efforts to detect the disease if it were to enter the United State.

And the third firewall is the feed ban. And the feed ban is a measure that if any of those, if the first firewall fails, if infectious material does get into North America, then the feed ban should prevent that infectious material from getting into the infected host which in this case is cattle.

So that is the significance of that.

DR. DEHAVEN: It occurred to me our NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] colleagues call those "redundant systems." So we have redundant systems, and if one fails, we've got a back-up in place.

Last question in the room here? Yes?

MARK SHERMAN: Mark Sherman with Associated Press.

Dr. DeHaven, on the 71 other (unclear), records indicate actually entered the United States, how many farms might be involved and in how many states?

DR. DEHAVEN: Again, our information is preliminary at this point in time. And so I hesitate to give you information that at this point is very preliminary. Let me say that at this point in time we don't have positive trace-backs to any other state outside of the state of Washington. As far as we know now all of the traces take U.S. back to the state of Washington.

Having said that, as we continue this tracing -- and it's always possible in livestock marketing channels for animals to have been in multiple locations -- I'm not excluding the possibility that some of our traces might eventually take U.S. to another state. But certainly at this point in time as far as we know in terms of those remaining animals that we haven't confirmed location on yet, all of those traces would be within the state of Washington.

Again, this is the focal point of our investigation at this point in time, so as that information develops I'll keep you posted, but as far as we know, limited to the state of Washington at this point in time.

With that, Operator, we'll go to the telephone bridge, please.

OPERATOR: Our next question's from Dawn Walton. Please state your affiliation.

DAWN WALTON: Oh, hi. I'm with the Globe and Mail in Canada.

With your ban on downer cows entering the human food chain, what does that mean for a country like Canada which tests every downer cow, holds it, and then the meat's cleared it can go into the human food chain? What would that mean for trade relations?

DR. DEHAVEN: As you probably know, early in November we published a proposed rule that would create a, what we refer to as a minimal risk country or zone, and from those countries that qualify as minimal risk or zone would permit certain commodities and certain live animals to include cattle under 30 months of age into the United States.

Given this situation, that rule -- well, let me first explain that rule, the comment period for that rule is still open and will be open at least until January 5. So we are still receiving comments on that rule, and we would welcome and encourage those comments.

Suffice it to say that this current situation that has been evolving since that proposed rule was published is an important factor, and the entire epidemiological investigation needs to be taken into account as we determine what action that we would take once this proposed rule has the comment period closed, and we make all due consideration in terms of how we proceed from there.

So it would be premature for me to speculate on where we might go as it references your question simply because that's directly tied to the rule that we proposed, and we obviously haven't made any determination on how we will proceed with that proposed rule since we're still in the middle of the comment period.

Next question, please?

OPERATOR: The next question's from Beth Gorum (sp). Please state your affiliation.

BETH GORUM: Hi. Beth Gorum from the Canadian Press Wire Service.

Dr. DeHaven, you said the last couple of days that U.S. trading partners were reacting based on perceptions rather than science. And I was wondering how that squares with the U.S. closing its borders to Canadian beef and cattle after the May case of Mad Cow.

DR. DEHAVEN: I have stated in previous press briefings that in fact in the past the United States has been part of the international problem in terms of only having two standards or two categories in place -- either countries have BSE or don't have BSE. But I've also said very emphatically that we have been very proactive since the finding of the case in Canada which brought home the fact that this reaction hasn't been consistent with international standards and therefore hasn't been

consistent with the science that we know about the disease because indeed those international standards are based on the science.

Because of that and that recognition, it was the U.S. that really has taken the first bold step to implement the international standards and the science-based standards.

We do so by allowing certain commodities, most notably boneless beef from animals under 30 months of age, to begin coming into the United States from Canada, and we did so not too long after the finding of that case, and we proposed this rule in November that would contemplate not only codifying those products but adding additional products or commodities that come into the United States as well as live animals.

That action is unprecedented in the international arena. So in fact while we may have been part of the problem in the past, we have taken a very active role in terms of trying to change that standard. We've been working very closely since then with our international North American partners, officials in Canada and Mexico, to develop a North American strategy.

And we are working through the international community, going to the OIE [Office of International Epizootics] to help their effort to get more countries to adopt the existing international standard.

One last question from the telephone bridge, please?

OPERATOR: The next question is from Jim Dugan (sp). Please state your affiliation.

JIM DUGAN: Yes. This is Jim Dugan with Ag Day Television.

I'd like to ask a follow-up question if I could to a question that was asked earlier from I think someone from United Press International, relating to the fact that these cows in Japan perhaps younger than 30 months tested positive.

If it's not clear whether or not those cows in fact have BSE or not, how can it be definitively said that all cows under 30 months are safe?

DR. DEHAVEN: International standards and national policy are established based on the preponderance of evidence that's available and established based on the recommendations of the international scientists whose job it is to stay current on the current research and current thinking with that regard.

If we were to, excuse the phrase, respond in a "knee-jerk reaction" to every aberrant finding in the scientific community, I'm afraid we would be having such knee-jerk reaction all of the time. And because there's always the abnormal situation that occurs in the scientific community.

And so again, we have to take the preponderance of scientific evidence that is available and base our international policies on that.

We also have in that regard the international standard-setting body whose job it is to establish those standards based on science, and clearly we would look to them as part of their responsibility to evaluate the new science and make adjustments accordingly. So i would certainly be premature to make any changes internationally based on these recent finds until there's been more opportunity to evaluate and draw some real science-based conclusions from them.

With that, Ed, we'll take some more questions in the room. Yes?

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: Dr. DeHaven, Shankar Vedantam, Washington Post.

I had a two-part question for you. Would you clarify on the SRM issue exactly what is you are preventing certain SRMs before yesterday from entering in the food supply, and you seem to have changed that in some way, perhaps added.

Could you give U.S. a clear sense of exactly what has been added -- in other words, what was there before and what has been added? And I guess the question is, why would it not have been added before the Washington state cow was discovered?

The second part of my question has to do with surveillance. Given that the surveillance system which was essentially a flag system picked out the case of mad cow in the U.S., have any changes been made to ascertain questions of prevalence more accurately now?

DR. DEHAVEN: With that first question let me refer to Dr. Dan Engeljohn from Food Safety and Inspection Service.

DR. ENGELJOHN: On the specified risk materials that were not allowed before announced yesterday versus those we announced yesterday, clarified that the tonsils have always been allowed to not be let in to human food supply or at least in the meat supply that goes in this country.

We're clarifying in the codified language to make it explicit that the tonsils cannot be there.

We also had in place a requirement that spinal cord tissue could not be in boneless meat, mainly being derived through the advanced meat recovery process. The policy that we put in place yesterday that we announced would add to the boneless meat restrictions, dorsal root ganglia, which is a risk material that can be incorporated into the product simply because of the process of pressing meat off the bone.

DR. DEHAVEN: Shankar, as it relates to your question about surveillance in our current system, would we make any changes to it? -- I would just clarify that surveillance is just that. The purpose of surveillance is to determine whether or not we have the disease. It's not intended to provide food safety in terms of 100 percent testing, but rather determine the prevalence. And it's the other measures that have been taken that protect food safety -- most notably the SRM removal that we've had in place and now we've expanded upon it as Dr. Inglejon just explained.

With the announcement yesterday we made a major shift in our surveillance system in that we have always targeted our surveillance at that high-risk population, those animals that are over a certain age and particularly those animals that are exhibiting central nervous system or nervous system disorders as well as those that have been nonambulatory.

With this announcement yesterday, since we have been obtaining most of those samples at slaughter I think our job, one, is to still be able to focus on that population, but we'll have to get those samples elsewhere. We'll now have to work with the animal disposal industry, all of the components of that industry, obviously most notably the renderers, to try and still be able to target that population at the level of the renderers.

There will certainly be some nonambulatory animals at other concentration points such as livestock markets, and we're going to have to focus as well on the farm. I think we have a well-established, good working relationship with the American Veterinary Medical Association. One of their allied groups is the American Association of Bovine Practitioners, and I would anticipate int he near future working very closely with them so that we can continue to target that population.

But in addition to getting them through other concentration points such as renderers and livestock markets, also move some of that emphasis on to the farm. So we recognize that the best surveillance targets that population. We just need to make the shift from slaughter plants to other points of concentration.

REPORTER: (unclear) CNN. I'd like to ask you, Dr. DeHaven or Dr. Engeljohn, will the new guidelines for processing mean that (unclear) inspectors will (unclear)?

DR. DEHAVEN: Dr. Engeljohn?

DR. ENGELJOHN: Yes. This is Dr. Engeljohn.

At this time it's preliminary to identify exactly what will happen with regards to our inspection program. We have inspectors in every plant in this country. We have a veterinarian on hand every day at ante-mortem inspection.

So we will adjust our work to accomplish the new policies that will go into place when they're published in the Federal Register.

DR. DEHAVEN: One last question here in the room?

MR. CURLETT: With all due respect to everyone in the room, we have a very large queue on the audio bridge, so why don't we do three or four more on the audio bridge, and that that will probably wrap it up.

DR. DEHAVEN: Okay. So, Operator, next question, please?

OPERATOR: The next question's from Jackie Vadco (sp). Please state your affiliation.

JACKIE VADCO (sp): Hello. I'm from Farm Progress Publications.

And my first question is, downer animals that arrive at a slaughter plant say that they had head stress in the trailer or had something that happened while in transit, what are you planning to do with those?

And when you're talking about downer animals, does that also include swine or any other animals that might end up at a slaughter plant that aren't necessarily cattle?

DR. ENGELJOHN: The policy on nonambulatory animals that FSIS has put into place yesterday, our intention will be that we will enforce the policy on the animals that arrive at the premise where the animals would be slaughtered. So when they are intended to be delivered to the slaughter facility when they arrive at that facility, then we will ensure that no nonambulatory animals will in fact go into the human food supply.

With regards to how we're clarifying the issue of nonambulatory animals, this would be related at this time strictly to cattle.

DR. DEHAVEN: In terms of testing those animals at slaughter, I think you're right -- some of them will be come nonambulatory at slaughter or en route to slaughter. I mentioned earlier that we want to continue to target that high-risk population, so we will be working with our colleagues at FSIS to further develop our system that is already in place that would allow U.S. to test those animals that do end up at slaughter and get samples from them -- whether it be there at the slaughter plant or if they go elsewhere for disposal get them at that disposal point.

But nevertheless, we will continue to work on getting those samples for those animals that do end up nonambulatory at the point of slaughter.

Next question, Operator?

OPERATOR: The next question is from Andy Dowton. Please state your affiliation.

SANDY DOWTON: No, this is Sandy Dowton from the Seattle Times.

My question is, what happens to the downer animals and the specified risk materials in the rendering process? What can they be used for after they're rendered?

DR. DEHAVEN: We'll give that to Dr. Steve Sundlof with FDA.

DR. STEPHEN SUNDLOF (FDA): Thank you. Well, currently they can go into animal feeds, or they can go into -- there's other products, specifically tallow, fats and oils that have many purposes, industrial purposes. They can be again used for cosmetics. The majority of the protein that is derived from those animals is allowed in animal feeds, other than ruminants. They cannot be fed back to cattle, sheep, goats or anything else that qualifies as a ruminant.

That's what the FDA feed ban is currently all about.

Certainly with the announcements yesterday we are at the FDA looking at any implications that involve the products that we regulate, including things like animal feeds, pet foods, et cetera. In working with our colleagues in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, working with some of the industries that are involved in the rendering process in the animal feed industry to determine how this may impact on us. We are actively involved in those discussion right now.

It will be some time I believe before we've reached any final decisions, but in the interim the feed ban is still in effect. We will exercise even greater vigilance with the new event that has taken place with the cow, and make sure that any products that derive from that rendering process maintain the safety of the food supply and the animal feed supply.

DR. DEHAVEN: Thanks, Steve.

Next question, please?

OPERATOR: The next question is from Leah Beth Ward. Please state your affiliation.

LEAH BETH WARD: Yakima Herald Republic.

Dr. DeHaven, you said in prior briefings that the feeding side operation was a bull calf ranch. Yesterday you talked about sorting the calves by gender. Can you be more precise in your description of that operation?

DR. DEHAVEN: Yes. As was originally reported to us, that was a bull calf feeding operation, and that is still, the information we have that is still largely accurate. However, as we went through the group of animals on that premises we did identify a number, small percentage of those animals. I think it was in the neighborhood of 25 to 30 of the total 464 animals that in fact were female. So it is largely a calf feeding or bull calf feeding operation, although it would be my guess that there are some heifer calves that are born that would for whatever reason not be suitable for going or being raised for milk replacers that would also end up in this kind of operation. So it's basically a feeding operation. I don't know exactly then what the intended purpose of the animals are after having been feed.

We understand that the ages of the animals on that premises vary from as little as seven days old to as much as five or six months of age, but in essence it's a calf feeding operation and for the most part we're talking about bull calves, although there are some heifers that get in there.

One more question -- two more questions from the telephone bridge. So next question, Operator, and then we'll take one more after that.

OPERATOR: The next question is from Seth Borenstein. Please state your company name.

SETH BORENSTEIN: Yes. This is Seth Borenstein with Knight Ridder Newspapers.

For Dr. Sundlof, you keep talking about 99 percent compliance on the feed ban, but I understand that's only on feed-making facilities. Do you actually look on farms? What's the enforcement on farms, if any? And what's the compliance on farms? Because that's where they can mix, I guess, ruminant and poultry feed.

DR. SUNDLOF: Well, a lot of the large feeding operations are themselves feed mills that we inspect, so some of that, in fact a large proportion of the feed lots for instance, have registered feed mills that we inspect. So they're part of the equation.

We have done approximately 3,000 inspections on farms in addition to all of the facilities that mix feed or render or haul feed or are protein blenders. We do things such as trace-forwards and trace-backwards, so that if we go to -- for instance if we go to a feed mill and find out that that feed mill is not in compliance we trace the product from that feed mill down to the farm level where it's actually being fed and looking at everything downstream to make sure that there is compliance.

There are we estimate somewhere in the order of 1 million ruminant feeders in this country, which is obviously a larger number than we can get to on a yearly basis. So we concentrate our efforts at the top of the pyramid which is the renderers and the feed mills making sure that if they are in compliance that the probabilities are very great that the feeders will be in compliance.

And at this time we have no permanent feeders that we are aware of that are not in compliance. All of them that we have inspected are in compliance.

DR. DEHAVEN: Last question from the telephone bridge, Operator.

OPERATOR: And the next question is from Johanna Newman. Please state your affiliation.

JOHANNA NEWMAN: This is Johanna Newman at the Los Angeles Times.

Japan does not seem overly impressed with the reforms that you announced yesterday. I'm wondering if the USDA --

Dr. DeHaven, you keep -- for the last week you've said that everything was on the table. Now that these reforms have been announced, would you contemplate testing of all slaughter if that is the price of resumption of foreign exports?

DR. DEHAVEN: I would just emphasize at this point that we are early in our investigation. Still we are in if I'm not mistaken our eighth day. To suggest that we would take as dramatic an action as you're suggesting, testing all animals, I think it's just too premature to make any kind of determination or any kind of predication as to what we may or may not do at this point in time.

I think job one is to conclude our investigation, confirm where this animal came from, what the other exposure there might have been with regard to this new find on December 23, convey that information to the Japanese, and not to suggest any radical changes in terms of what we might or might not do for trading partners at this point in time.

I wouldn't exclude any possibilities at this time, but to suggest that we might be taking that kind of action at this point is just simply too premature.

We will continue to have discussions with our trading partners, especially with the Japanese. I understand that we will have a technical team that will be visiting the U.S. from Japan in the not-

too-distant future, and with those kinds of activities and discussions ongoing, again just too premature to predict what we might or might not do for Japan or any of our trading partners.

With that, just a couple of closing comments.

We have had a good system in place. You've heard me say time and again about the safeguards and fireballs that have been in place and the fact that that system as is evident by this case, as unfortunate as it was, has worked; that all of the things came into place. We've had redundant systems in place, and the protections that they have afforded have ensured that U.S. beef is safe.

I think the announcements made by the Secretary yesterday show a very proactive and aggressive approach to bolstering that system to ensuring that we not only have a good system but further redundancies in that system to ensure the safety of U.S. beef.

I don't think there is any reason for doubt in terms of the safety of U.S. beef before yesterday. But clearly if there were, with the fact that nonambulatory animals will no longer be going into the food chain, with the fact that even if through those redundant systems we were to get another infected animal in the United States, removal of the specified risk materials, those tissues that harbor the infectious agents, would no longer go into the food chain from any animal over 30 months of age -- should certainly satisfy anyone that had lingering doubts about the safety of the U.S. food supply.

So we will be doing our best to aggressively implement those announcements that the Secretary made yesterday, and again feel that the system that we had in place plus the additional safeguards that were announced should continue to satisfy consumers in the U.S. that we have a very safe meat supply.

With that, again thank you very much. And Ed, I'll pass it back to you for announcements on any future press conferences.

MR. CURLETT: Thank you very much, Dr. DeHaven.

The next press conference, press availability, will be on Friday. Time to be announced. The monitor to be USDA website. Again that will be tentatively scheduled on Friday, so nothing tomorrow.

Again, transcripts are available on the USDA website, and hopefully the audio bridge can hear me -- the next scheduled media availability will be on Friday. We'll announce the time. Check out the USDA website for that.

If you have questions based on today's technical briefing, call 202-720-4623. We do have a system in place to get back to everybody. And with that, I'd like to thank everybody for coming and we'll see you on the next time.

[end]